

**Presentation to the London Bach Society concert 4th November 2019
at St Georges Church, Hanover Sq, London by BSB**

It is often said: All roads lead to Bach. The *St Matthew Passion* is widely regarded as one of the greatest of Bach's choral works. Yet had it not been for the prodigious 20 year old Felix Mendelssohn who had been given a hand copied score as a present from his grandmother, it might never have come to light a hundred years after the original performance. His edition of the work was first performed in Berlin on 11th March 1829 to roughly coincide with the composers birthday and in the presence of the King, Mendelssohn conducting a choir of 158 from a grand piano followed very shortly afterwards by two more performances.

Concerned about the attention span of the audience to listen for over three hours and the availability of competent performers, his edition differed from the original in that he omitted 10 arias, 4 recitatives and 6 chorales. In addition he rearranged some of the orchestral parts to reflect a gradual shift in popular taste from the baroque style to the romantic emphasising the crucial moments and to give expression to human emotions. The reception was mixed simply because Bach's music was largely unknown but the event was nevertheless a seminal act of faith on the part of Mendelssohn in a long journey to rehabilitate Bach. He repeated the work on Good Friday 4th April 1841 in Bach's church, the Thomaskirche in Leipzig

In England the story bears similarities. Bach's music was relatively unknown. Samuel Wesley and Thomas Walmisley had promoted his organ and clavier works, as did William Crotch who was the first Principal of the Royal Academy of Music.

William Sterndale Bennett was regarded as something of a beacon of hope in England, a country which John Betjeman once described as a musical stagnant swamp. His first teacher at the Academy was William Crotch who introduced him to Bach's piano works. Then in 1833 at the age of 17 he met Mendelssohn in London who invited him to Leipzig where they, together with Schumann, became close friends and collaborators thus helping to cement his interest in Bach.

For the 1841 performance in Leipzig Mendelssohn decided to restore some of the cuts. Meanwhile Bennett who was introducing the works of some of the great masters to the English public through his popular Classical Chamber Concerts at the Hanover Square Rooms, took advantage of using it as a vehicle for promoting Bach's music but this proved to be a formidable task.

Audiences found the music perplexing, intellectual, slightly antiquated even boring and repetitive. Some professors said to Bennett it was a hopeless dream. Undaunted, Bennett then decided to take the initiative and founded the Bach Society in 1849 consisting of a few of his professional friends with the express intention of setting up a library of all known works by Bach and to promote performances, the first being the *Six Motets*, which was the only work found with an English translation. The first rehearsals under Sir George Smart gave great trouble and he having exhausted his patience with the choir turned on Bennett who was accompanying at the piano and proceeded to blame his pianoforte, provoking much laughter.

But there was another problem. This time a social one. London was in the grip of a serious outbreak of cholera resulting in the death of some 15000 people, including one Miss Vinning from the choir, and it also had an effect on people deciding whether or not to risk attending concerts.

Thanks to his friendship with Mendelssohn he was able to get the 1829 edition copied and sent over to England. Fearing the length of the work would sap the attention span of the audience let alone the abilities of the limited musical forces at his disposal, he cut out more.

Regarding the Passion as an act of worship it was deemed appropriate to use the vernacular, but translation into English not only raised the problem of possibly distorting the biblical text but also how best to handle diphthongs and the rhythmic stress with its underlying scan yet maintaining vowel colours to make it singable without changing the composition of the music.

Quite fortuitously an early member was Helen Johnston, an 18 year old pupil of Bennett's at Queens College in Harley Street. She was destined to have a profound influence on the Bach movement in this country.

Her dedication to the cause was such that she diligently learned German and the organ. She prepared with her own hands her translation into English of the vocal parts then copied them having purchased a lithograph machine in her lodgings at St John's Wood. She would be seen trundling along to rehearsals with her Bach portfolio in a heavy carrier she had constructed. Rather eccentric in appearance with eyes gleaming through large glasses and with her own ideas of dress sense, she unwittingly disguised her youth. Charles Steggall, her organ teacher and Secretary of the Bach Society was asked by a colleague "Is that Mrs Bach". Later summoned to India to escort her sick father home she was found teaching the parts to members of the ships crew. We know little else about her other than that she died at the age of 72 and had 19 cats - all of whom were named.

The Bach Society choir of 25 found the work very difficult so had to be supplemented by students from the Academy, and choristers from the Chapel Royal and St Pauls Cathedral. The first performance of this abridged version duly took place at the Hanover Square Rooms on 6th April 1854 and was repeated seven months later, both to a mixed reception. Indeed one member of the choir was the future composer and organist Sir John Stainer, then only 13 years old, who wrote back to his father of the experience by saying Bennett was very kind and patient with us but the orchestra was I quote 'all a bit of a bungle'.

Today we have become accustomed to very high standards of performance but in those days without the the advantage of recordings, let alone a rather effusive press coverage, I have often wondered what was the reality. After all the soloists were famous in their day. Among them was Sims Reeves who wrote, and I quote 'The tenor part is in many places so unvocal, and the intervals are so awkward to take'. At a conference to mark the 150th anniversary of that first performance, from the floor I asked the Chairman, the late Sir David Willcocks for his view. He paused, smiled and simply replied 'Well, I would have auditioned the soloists'

These two attempts were written off as a rehearsal then Bennett mounted a third performance at St Martins Hall on 23rd March 1858, which he personally financially underwrote. By this time the music had been printed . Prince Albert, himself an accomplished musician, first met Bennett in 1841 when his Naiades overture was performed at a Philharmonic concert and again when he was Superintendent of Music for the Great Exhibition of 1851, so Bennett felt able to invite him to attend which naturally attracted a large audience.

The Prince was obviously pleased. as he asked for another performance at Windsor Castle, which duly took place the following year.

Following the performance in 1858 much interest was aroused with the appearance in England of a book which contained translations by Catherine Winkworth of German Hymns. Bennett and Otto Goldschmidt, a pupil of Mendelssohn and later deputy Principal at the RAM, worked in collaboration to produce the *Chorale Book of England*.

Whilst Bennett's performances had their shortcomings, it is a story of perseverance against contemporary perceptions that Bach's music was too difficult to listen to or play. Novello published the first English edition in 1862 which was a precursor to other editions and the founding of the Bach Choir in London as we know it today.

Meanwhile the late Dr Paul Steinitz who founded the London Bach Society premiered the first complete and original German edition in this country in 1952 and the society, now under the Artistic Direction of his widow Margaret Steinitz, continues to work tirelessly to promote a true understanding of the composers works.

As for William Sterndale Bennett he held an honourable place on the midslopes of British musical history. As the education reformer and musicologist Henry Hadow wrote 'he found English Music a barren land, enriched its soil and developed its cultivation'. Orphaned early in life he soon displayed his prodigious talents as a composer-pianist attracting high praise in Leipzig and where he became a fluent German speaker and never forgot the debt owed from his experiences there. Whilst there Bennett wrote a number of orchestral, solo piano and vocal works much of which has been recorded. A youthful example is the Chamber Trio being performed this evening.

On returning to England in 1842 aged 26 he set up the Classical Chamber Concert series in London introducing among others Clara Schumann, Jenny Lind and Joseph Joachim to the English public. He was offered but gracefully declined the conductorship of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in favour of succeeding Wagner as Conductor of the Philharmonic Society Orchestra at a troubling time and was among the first recipients of their coveted Gold Medal. He was appointed Professor of Music at Cambridge and then as Principal of the Royal Academy of Music. He was knighted for his services and on his death in 1875 buried at Westminster Abbey.

Retiring by nature, shunning self publicity and indifferent to the financial worth of his own works, he proved to be tenacious in adversity. This was displayed when he saved the Academy from closure in 1866 and for his contribution to promoting Bach in this country.

So it can be seen both Mendelssohn and Bennett had to battle with the prevailing public perceptions and limited forces available but were lucky to draw in Royal patronage. For those of us who sing this glorious music be it in German or English let us pause for a moment and remember those early struggles - and count our blessings. Thank you.

